

# Beach Cottage Row Historic District

## LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT PLAN



*Joren Walter Dunnavant*

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

*Masters of Urban and Regional Planning 2008*



Aerial View of Study Area (figure 1).



Example of Architecture (figure 2).

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A row of late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century cottages currently exist on beach-front property in Nags Head, NC (figure 1). These cottages have extremely high real estate value as well as historical significance to the Town of Nags Head. This row of cottages is recognized as a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places (figure 4). Many residents feel that this 'district' gives the town a sense of place and meaning. The cottages define the area's original architecture and spatial arrangement. The architecture is exclusively cottage style with wrap around porches, sash hung windows, and

unpainted shingle siding (figure 2). Many of the cottages have brick chimneys and wooden shutters. A common theme is green windows and a red front door.

To the west, on the opposite side of US 158 and to the south of the district, new development is beginning to appear. This development is both residential and commercial, most of which does not reflect or compliment the existing architectural styles. These new architectural styles have the potential to significantly weaken or destroy the historical and architectural significance of this area.

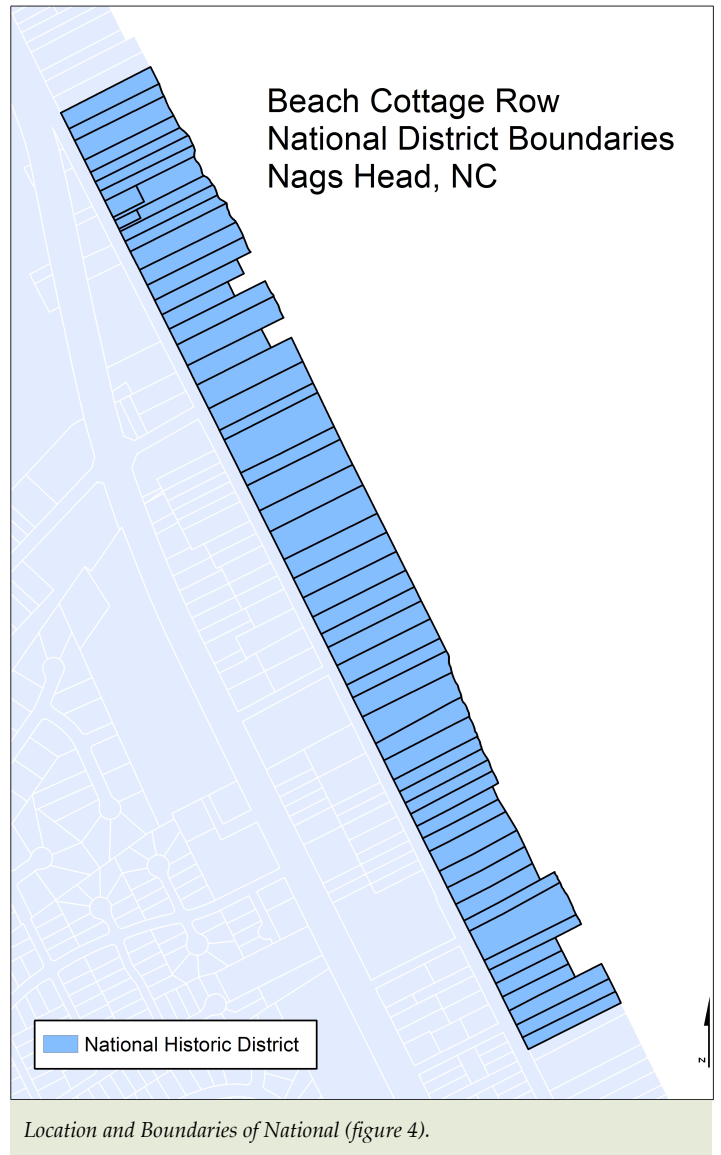
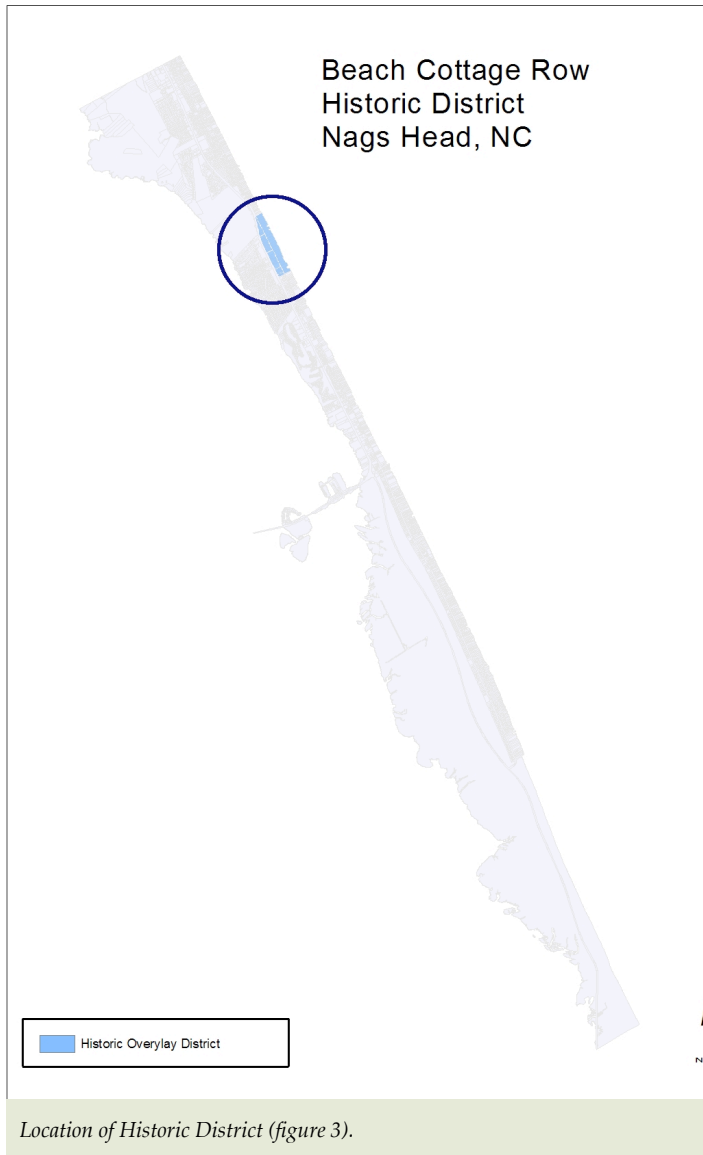
The purpose of this plan is to preserve the existing historical architecture and character in Beach Cottage Row. This plan assists my client, along with the Town of Nags Head in executing a local historic district as an overlay district for Beach Cottage Row. The plan includes recommendations and direction needed to prepare for and implement a local historic district. The plan values community participation and input and reflects the community's needs and vision for this historic area.

## VISION STATEMENT

Beach Cottage Row will be a beautiful neighborhood which represents the architectural aspects of the historic Town of Nags Head. The district will be residential in character with a number of small businesses. Beach Cottage Row will be a distinct area which displays the community's character and history through preservation, maintenance of buildings and appropriate new development.



L O C A L H I S T O R I C D I S T R I C T P L A N



L O C A L H I S T O R I C D I S T R I C T P L A N

## Introduction

In 2008, Bill Flowers (a property owner) contacted Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Masters of Urban and Regional Planning in search of assistance to protect the historic Beach Cottage Row in Nags Head, North Carolina. Mr. Flowers became a client for a Studio II whose purpose is to propose local protections that can be implemented by the town of Nags Head. Panel members are instructor Kim Chen and instructor Mort Gulak. This studio project is a graduation requirement of the Masters of Urban and Regional Planning Program at VCU.

## History

*An overview of the historical elements in the project area is important in that it identifies the correlation between history and the plan. An outline of the historical events which took place in the project area highlights the significance of history for the plan.*

French and Spanish explorers came to the Outer Banks in search of gold between the years of 1524 and 1588. In 1584, Queen Elizabeth I

issued a charter to Sir Walter Raleigh to establish a colony in North Carolina. Several attempts were made to settle on Roanoke Island but were unsuccessful, the settlers mysteriously disappeared. The first English child born in America was born on Roanoke Island and became part of the history surrounding the lost colony. In 1607, settlers at Jamestown, Virginia tried in vain to find the lost colony.

The Lords Proprietors chartered the land in North America between the thirty-first to the thirty-sixth parallels from the Atlantic to the South Seas. During the years of 1673 and 1711, several Carolina colonies struggled into existence. Between the years of 1710 and 1718, this area was ruled by pirates, including Blackbeard. In 1729, the English Crown resumed direct rule of the colony from the Lords Proprietors.

After 1730, North Carolina was still under Royal control and prospering. Land inland and westward was also being settled.

Certain British policies became a nuisance and so colonies quickly joined in resistance. North Carolinians contributed to the defeat of British military power in the War for Independence and continued to progress as the federal system was formed in the new nation.

The early half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was generally uneventful besides the numerous vessels lost at sea in what was to become known as the "Graveyard of the Atlantic."

During the Civil War, northern forces invaded the coast, capturing Fort Hatteras and Fort Clark on the Outer Banks. In 1862, The Burnside Expedition captured Roanoke Island, which was fundamental to the North Carolina's eastern river system. In 1862, the USS Monitor (a Union ironclad) sunk off the coast of North Carolina. Earlier, the Monitor had engaged the Confederate ship (Virginia) in combat. This was the first battle between ironclad ships.



## L O C A L H I S T O R I C D I S T R I C T P L A N

In 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright made the first successful airplane flight from Kill Devil Hill near Kitty Hawk on the Outer Banks. Coastal North Carolina saw and felt the effects of World War I as the water of the Outer Banks filled with German submarines and yards at Wilmington, Morehead City and Elizabeth City were converted to building vessels for the war effort. In 1918, the Diamond Shoals Lightship was sunk by a German submarine. Shortly after, a British tanker was sunk off Rodanthe by another German submarine.

In 1937, the first production of the *Lost Colony* was performed at Fort Raleigh, and the Cape Hatteras National Seashore was established. Fort Raleigh, located on Roanoke Island, was designated as a National Historic Site, helping to make this area an important tourist attraction.

During World War II, German submarines patrolled the coastal North Carolina waters. The British ship (*San Delfino*) was sunk north

of Diamond Shoals. Bodies from this ship are interred at The British Cemetery on Ocracoke Island.

Some of the first cottages in this area were built over the water and some of them in water deep enough for sailing boats to unload luggage or parties on the porches. A few of these have been moved to the ocean side. The idea of Nags Head as a resort originally was started from the custom of wealthy farmers taking their slaves there for their health after the crops were laid by in July. It was believed during this time that malaria was cured by the salt air and ocean baths. The slaves would sleep in hammocks under the trees. After slavery was abolished, the impoverished former owners of slaves would travel to Nags head for their own health.

The development of Nags Head has been heavily fueled by tourism. The industry of tourism replaced fishing and hunting and what was a family or cottage beach setting has now become an international destination. Much of the pristine

coastline has been preserved by the National Park System's ownership and administration of these resources.

Most of the cottages in this district represent a style of architecture that is related to the various historical events that took place in this area. The cottages were built during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The style of architecture that defines Beach Cottage row identifies a specific time in this area in which function in design was highly important. The architecture and design in Beach Cottage Row explain specific events throughout history.



*Historic photo of a Beach Cottage Row Cottage.*

## Geographic Features

*An analysis of the geographic features in and around the study area have a great influence on the character and identity of the area for this project.*

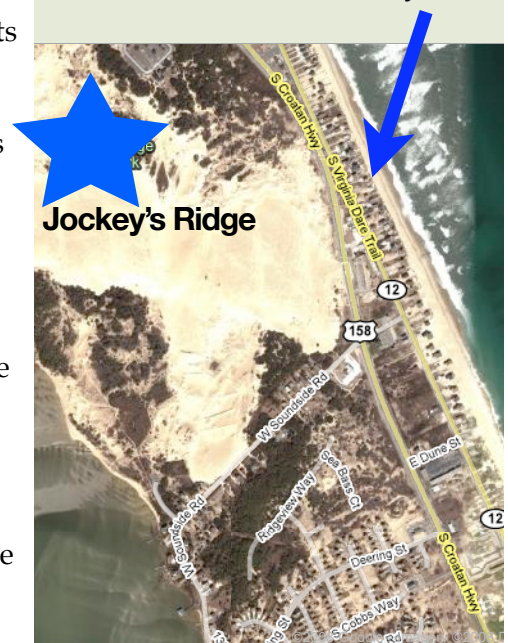
Jockey's Ridge State Park is located only slightly north west of the study area (figure 7). This natural feature is the tallest active sand dune system in the Eastern United States and one of the most significant landmarks on the Outer Banks. Shifting winds are constantly reshaping the dunes. There are three distinct ecological environments which encompass this park: The Dunes (figure 6), Maritime Thicket, and the Roanoke Sound Estuary (figure 5). The dunes consist of three peaks of shifting sand with no plants or animals due to the harsh environmental conditions. The amount of sand that the dunes cover makes up to 420 acres. The maritime thicket is characterized by live oaks, persimmons, red cedar, wax myrtle, bayberry, sweet gum, red oaks and pine trees. The growth of the trees is stunted by

the effects of the wind and salt causing the trees to look like shrubs. Animals such as foxes, deer and raccoon dwell here. The Roanoke Sound Estuary is a habitat for a variety of plant and animal life. This section of the park is characterized by cattails, saw grass, black needle rush and waterfowl. This is also the habitat for the Blue Crab which is an important commercial fisheries industry in North Carolina.

This geographic feature is important to the plan because of its proximity to the plan area; its aesthetic and recreational contribution to the community; its national recognition; and high numbers of visitation. Jockey's Ridge is an important factor in predicting future growth in this area as well as increased visitors. Jockey's Ridge has the potential be both a threat and strength to this plan. This natural feature compliments the area's serenity and rural feel, however, being a national attraction it may also pose threats of overdevelopment in the plan area.

*Location of Jockey's Ridge relative to study area (figure 7).*

Study Area



**Jockey's Ridge**



*Jockey's Ridge (figures 5 & 6).*





## Visual

This area consists of a row of historic cottages built along the ocean which are consistent in architectural style and arrangement (figure 10). The setbacks from both the road and the ocean vary slightly, but overall are consistent (figures 11 and 12). The cottages are built along the beach front with enough space in between each cottage to give a sense of privacy. The row of cottages is bounded by bypass US-12 to the west. The strip of land on the west side of US-12 includes both residential and

commercial activity. The commercial and residential buildings on this strip of land are diverse in architectural style (figure 13). The homes on this strip are mostly consistent with the historic cottage style with a few exceptions. The majorities of commercial buildings are small and are built close to the road (figure 14). There are a few shopping strips with medium sized parking lots (figure 15). To the west is highway US-158, this is bounded to the west by mostly residential activity. Just to the north of the study area, there

is a heavy concentration of commercial activity. These commercial buildings are large with very large parking lots between the buildings and street. Just north of bypass US-12, the homes are built much more densely with an architectural style that is much different from the cottage style in the project area. The overall visual impression of Nags Head is rural and residential. The beach front is mostly privately owned with few hotels. During the off-season, the area feels quiet and serene.



Beach Cottage (figure 10).



Beach Cottage (figure 11).



Beach Cottage (figure 12).

## Surrounding Influences

Both Virginia Tide Water area and the Raleigh/Durham metropolitan area are within short driving distance of Nags Head. Both of these areas are among of the Nation's fastest growing metropolises. As these areas continue to grow, Nags Head will likely become increasingly popular as a tourist destination, which is great for the local economy. However this needs to be considered for the potential effects on future development, population growth, and Beach Cottage Row.

## Environmental Threats

The district is located along the shore, where there are flooding

concerns. The cottages are built to withstand high tide and flooding, with the appropriate maintenance. Precautions are necessary for future infill development as well as improvements to existing buildings.

## Condition of Cottages

The U.S. Department of the Interior under the National Register of Historic Places Inventory for Beach Cottage Row indicates that the condition of the majority of the cottages is good. There are a few cottages which need maintenance. The nature of the cottage's construction requires constant maintenance. Further, the overall continuity of the district's character requires uniform maintenance for consistency.

*Examples of Cottage Conditions (figures 8 & 9).*





## Economy

*An analysis of the area's economy is a good indicator of the area's future population growth and specific project area's future development.*

The Outer Banks, which consists of Currituck and Dare Counties has one of North Carolina's healthiest economies. Currituck had approximately 23,100 population in 2005. Since July 2000, Currituck was the third fastest growing county in the state. Dare had a population of 33,900 in 2005 and is the state's 67<sup>th</sup> most populated county. Dare has grown by 2.5 percent since July 2000 which makes this the 16<sup>th</sup> fastest growing county in the state and exceeds the statewide average growth rate.

These estimates do not give an adequate picture of the number of persons that constitute the population since this is a vacation destination. A 2005 study for Dare County estimated that the effective peak seasonal daytime population of the county surpassed 220,000. Dare County supports services for a population that is seven times the size of its resident population. The Outer Banks is structured to

support tourist orientation and demand. Construction makes up 8.6 percent of the area's economy (versus 6.0 percent statewide), retail trade, makes up 18.6 percent of the economy versus 11.7 percent statewide, real estate makes up 11.4 percent of the economy compared to the state's 1.6 percent, and leisure and hospitality is at 22.3 percent (versus 9.4 percent in the state).

Growing gasoline prices has slowed down the economic growth of the Outer Banks economy somewhat but the economy continues to flourish. In the past year, employment in this area grew by 2.5 percent. This is slightly below the statewide average of 3.0 percent. Since November 2000, the Outer Banks has experienced an average annual increase in employment of 4.2 percent versus 1.3 percent in the state. The unemployment rate for the coastal area is below the statewide average.

This area is growing economically. The population is increasing, along with the numbers of visitors. The

project area should expect to see a high demand for development soon.

(Dare County Chamber of Commerce)

## Existing Design Codes

The town of Nags Head has an existing residential design manual for new construction and remodeling. This manual contains controls on various design elements. Design elements include porches, dormers, coastal watch towers, building form, roofs, and siding materials. These policies and regulations are to protect and promote the unique and historical elements of residential architecture which is valued as an important part of the town image. The goal of this manual is to produce architecture with a coastal style without stifling creativity or modern design. A point system is used to encourage the desired design for certain categories of buildings. The most important design element of these styles is the wraparound porch and this has the greatest value in the point system.

## LAND USE

The current land use map for the Town of Nags Head indicates that the study area is mostly intended for residential use (figure 17). Beach Cottage Row is almost completely residential use with a small portion of undeveloped land. The adjacent land to the west of US-12 is mostly undeveloped with areas of commercial and residential activity. This undeveloped land is key to this plan. The proximity to the beach and nearby commercial use makes this prime land for both residential and commercial activity. Further west, the land adjacent to US-158 is used almost exclusively for residential activity with some religious facility use. The area west of US-158 includes a large section of undeveloped land right on the highway. The direction of these areas and how it is developed is crucial in determining the outcome of this plan.

## ZONING

The current zoning map for the Town of Nags Head indicates exclusive low density residential use for Beach Cottage Row (figure 18). To the west of US-12, the land is zoned for general commercial activity. The land west of US-158 is zoned for medium residential activity and Jockey's Ridge Park is a special planned development district (figure 16).



*Indication of major transportation routes (figure 16).*





Example of architecture (figure 17).



Example of architecture (figure 18).



Example of architecture (figure 19).

## Architecture

The architecture of the cottages is shingle style which most accurately represents a style of architecture popular between the years of 1880 - 1900. The houses are two or three stories tall, and typified by the uniform covering of wood shingles (unpainted) from the roof to the foundation walls (figure 18). The sweep of the roof may continue to the first floor level providing cover for porches, or may be steeply

pitched and multi-planed. The eaves of the roof are close to the walls so as not to distract from the homogeneous and monochromatic shingle covering. Casement and sash windows are generally small, may have many lights, and often are grouped into twos or threes.

The consistent architectural style in this district is represented by unpainted shingle siding, large wrap around porches, sash hung windows, accents of red and green

(figure 22). The roofs are mostly gable and vary in pitch. A few of the cottages divert from this style of roof with a steep pyramidal roof. Many of the cottages have a second story wrap around balcony. The cottages are placed high on open foundations of timber pilings. They are typically constructed of vertical members with diagonal cross braces. The pilings place the houses high enough to be above low waves in case of storms, as well as making the houses more



Example of architecture (figure 20).



Example of architecture (figure 21).



Example of architecture (figure 22).

## L O C A L H I S T O R I C D I S T R I C T P L A N

There is a common theme of repetitive braced underpinnings and a lack of a solid visual foundation in the district. The foundation height varies. Intersecting angles of wooden members make up the porches of the cottages as well. Usually roofed and supported on simple posts, the porches also feature enclosing balustrades of different kinds. A particular functional feature of Nags Head cottages is the ubiquitous porch bench. These are benches built into and extending out from the porch balustrade, with the base beginning flush with the balustrade and back sloping outward from the porch. In some cases, the screening extends out and around the bench. Nearly all the cottages have similar door and window treatments. Most have outer screen doors. The outside the screen door, is a sturdy

wooden batten door. The window shutters are also of wooden batten construction. Each is a single leaf, hinged at the top, and held open with a prop stick. When open, the shutter acts as a diagonal awning.

A number of the cottages feature freestanding garages (figure 25). These are usually simple one-story affairs, with gable or sometime hip roofs. The boathouses, which generally stand near the road, usually have ramps leading to them. Simple vertical boards, or the standard wood shingles are the primary surface materials. All the cottages rely on the simple expression of functional forms, materials, and plan for their character.

There are several variations of a common theme. One type, dating from the 1910-1940 era, is the large,

bungalow cottage, 1.5 stories high, with full-width dormers extending across the front and back slopes of the gable roof. This variation may be two, three, four, or five bays wide, and usually features porches on at least two and usually four sides. Another common and usually older style is a simple gable-roof, two-story cottage type, three to five bays wide. There are usually single-story porches on two to four sides. Another style that exists is two-stories with a hipped or pyramidal roof, with a highly restrained geometric quality. There are several one-story cottages integrated into this district as well. Some of these have steep gable rooflines with the multi-slope gables with lower, shallower slope on one or both sides engaging a porch.



*Beach Cottage (figure 23).*



*Beach Cottage (figure 24).*



*Beach Cottage (figure 25).*



## L O C A L H I S T O R I C D I S T R I C T P L A N

## New Architecture

The architectural style of new residential development that is taking place outside of the district is distinct and very different from the architectural style in this

district (figures 26, 27, and 28). This style of architecture is a modern beach house architecture. The homes are mostly three stories with front porches on the second and third stories. The building materials are wood and siding and

the colors are bright and diverse. Circular windows and dormer windows are a common theme (figure 28). Many of these homes include large paved driveways and fences and some have swimming pools.



*Examples of new architecture  
(figures 26, 27, & 28).*



## State Enabling Legislation

In the State of North Carolina, a local historic designation is conferred by a local governing board following a recommendation by its preservation commission. Commissions only exist where they have been created by the locality, and only commissions created pursuant to state law can exercise design review over properties designated by the local governing board. A local government decides to provide for the preservation of the historical, cultural, or archaeological resources within its jurisdiction. It can pass an ordinance to create a historic preservation commission. The members of this preservation commission are selected by the local governing board from the general public. A majority of the members must demonstrate a special interest in history, architecture, archaeology, or related fields. In certain cases, the planning board may be able to act as the preservation/architecture commission.

A commission's powers are to recommend to the local governing board properties to be designated as historic districts and landmarks and to review applications from owners of designated landmarks and structures in historic districts that plan to make changes to their properties. The commission is also charged to conduct an inventory of the area's historic resources. Its other powers include conducting a public education program.

A local historic district must have a concentration of properties that are historically, visually, or culturally related either by plan or by physical development. A district may include diverse types of historic properties, but they must form a unified entity with its own identity. They can be connected by historical events or by their functions. The district is distinguished from surrounding areas by differences in various characteristics of its properties, such as type, age, style, or density, or by well-documented differences in patterns of historical development or association.

Historic districts may be treated either as overlay districts or as separate use districts. An overlay district does not replace or alter the existing zoning; it superimposes the historic district over the existing zoning. A separate use district is an entirely new zoning classification, with its own permitted uses, dimensional requirements, and other zoning regulations.

The process of designation begins when a commission identifies a property or an area as a potential landmark or district. An investigation is made of the historic, prehistoric, architectural, and cultural significance of the area. A report of this investigation, including a description of the boundaries, is submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office. The State Historic Preservation Office then reviews the report and makes recommendations about the report and the description of the proposed boundaries.

## L O C A L H I S T O R I C D I S T R I C T P L A N

The local governing board may choose to refer to interested bodies for other recommendations. The commission then may recommend to the local governing board that it designate the proposed district. The local governing board may designate the district by following the usual procedure for adopting or amending a zoning ordinance. Public hearings will be required as part of this procedure. Before an area can be designated as a historic district, the local governing board must find that the area has special historic, prehistoric, architectural, or cultural significance and shows integrity of design, setting, materials, feeling, or association. It

is not necessary for every property in a historic district to be individually significant. A district may be considered significant even if none of its components possess individual distinction as long as the group as a whole has significance and integrity.

The State Historic Preservation Office plays an advisory role in offering technical assistance in selecting boundaries. It is up to the commission or the local planning board to recommend the boundaries of a proposed district to the local governing board. It is up to the local governing board to make the boundary decision. The boundaries should be selected to

contain a significant concentration of properties contributing to the historical and visual character of the district as a whole. In drawing boundaries, it is important to consider visual barriers, visual changes, historical boundaries, and clearly differentiated patterns. Owners of local landmarks or of properties in a local historic districts are required to obtain certificates of appropriateness from their preservation commission before making significant changes to a property, before beginning construction, or before demolishing or relocating a property. Commissions adopt design guidelines as the criteria to judge what changes are appropriate.



*Nags Head Beach (figure 29).*

## L O C A L H I S T O R I C D I S T R I C T P L A N



# GOALS/OBJECTIVES

**GOAL 1**

The Cottages of Beach Cottage Row will be preserved and maintained as a national treasure.

*OBJECTIVE: Demolition of the cottages of Beach Cottage Row will be regulated through regulations stated in overlay local historic district.*

**GOAL 2**

Beach Cottage Row will have definition and recognition as a distinct historic area.

*OBJECTIVE: A local historic district will give Beach Cottage Row the necessary tools to accomplish consistency and definition.*

*OBJECTIVE: Proper signage that is visible from the road will indicate entry and exits points in the Beach Cottage Row district.*

**GOAL 3**

The unique character of Beach Cottage Row will be preserved.

*OBJECTIVE: Future development and new construction will be controlled to compliment the existing architectural theme of the district.*

*OBJECTIVE: Beach Cottage Row will have an overlay local historic district that includes buildings and vacant land which are adjacent to the historic area.*

**GOAL 4**

The existing architectural style of the cottages in Beach Cottage Row will be preserved.

*OBJECTIVE: An overlay local historic district for Beach Cottage Row will include maintenance design codes which will require buildings to have consistency and integrity in design.*

*OBJECTIVE: An overlay local historic district for Beach Cottage Row will require an architectural review for all improvements made to a building.*